DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 226 UD 033 883

AUTHOR	Donohue, Elizabeth; Schiraldi, Vincent; Ziedenberg, Jason
TITLE	School House Hype: School Shootings and the Real Risks Kids Face in America. Policy Report.
INSTITUTION	Justic Policy Inst., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.
PUB DATE	1998-07-00
NOTE	23p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Justice Policy Institute, 2208 Martin Luther King Jr., Avenue, S.E., Washington, DC 20020. Tel: 202-678-9282; Web site: http://www.cjcj.org/jpi.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	After School Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Guns; *Homicide; Public Schools; *School Safety; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS	*School Shootings

ABSTRACT

This report examines risks that children and youth face in America's schools to determine whether there is a trend toward increasing violent school deaths in America and noting the overall incidence of crime, particularly homicides, inside versus outside of the schools. Data come from the Department of Education, Department of Justice, FBI, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National School Safety Center, National Safe Kids Campaign, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Center To Prevent Handgun Violence, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and newspaper clippings (to obtain school-related violence data). Results indicate that recent school shootings were extremely idiosyncratic events and not part of any trend. The likelihood of becoming a victim of school-associated violent death is less than one in one million. While most children killed by guns are killed by adults, children are killed in gun accidents at 23 times the rate they are killed in schools. American children are 12 times more likely to die from guns than children in 25 other industrialized countries. The paper recommends channeling public energy into removing guns from children and adults and providing constructive opportunities for children during peak crime hours (after school programs and restriction on mass gun sales). (SM)

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JULY 1998

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POLICY REPORT

School House Hype:

School Shootings and the Real Risks Kids Face in America

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School House Hype:
School shootings and the real risks kids face in America.

*By Elizabeth Donohue, Vincent Schiraldi, and Jason Ziedenberg**

"THIS RECENT SERIES OF KILLINGS IN OUR SCHOOLS HAS SEARED THE HEART OF AMERICA ABOUT AS MUCH AS ANYTHING I CAN REMEMBER IN A LONG, LONG TIME."
– President Bill Clinton, July 7, 1998.

"YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN IT'S GOING TO BE ONE OF YOUR KIDS." *– A parent, interviewed after the Springfield, Oregon school shooting.*

Introduction

During the 1997-98 school year, the American public was riveted by the images: small town and suburban schools taped off by police-lines, paramedics rushing to wheel tiny bodies away on gurneys and kids being carted off in hand-cuffs. As the national news media poured into Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania and Springfield, Oregon; the magnified coverage of these highly unusual crime stories turned into what some news outlets described as "an all-too-familiar story" or "another in a recent trend." Even a non-fatal shooting in Richmond, Virginia garnered national headlines in June because it occurred in a high school hallway during final exams.

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In the following months, policy makers reacted abruptly to what they perceived to be a huge swing in public opinion: a moral panic swept the country as parents and children suddenly feared for their safety at school. As one parent recently put it: "It scares me to death that I'm sending my child to a school...and in light of getting an education, I may end up burying her."[1] A middle school principal from a community that has experienced a 26 percent drop in juvenile crime – a community that hasn't had a murder arrest of an adult or juvenile in two years – warned a reporter after the Jonesboro shooting, "It could happen any place."[2]

As many kids were killed in just 2 days of family violence and abuse as were killed in the 5 publicized school shootings.

But it doesn't happen "any place." Table 1 illustrates that even in the communities in which these tragic shootings have occurred, they are atypical events. Eighty-five percent of all the communities in America recorded no juvenile homicides in 1995, and 93.4 percent recorded one or no juvenile arrests for murder. Three times as many juvenile homicide victims are killed by adults as by other juveniles, and only about 3 percent of U.S. murders consist of a person under 18 killing another person under 18.[3]

Table 1

Juvenile Arrests for Homicide in School Shooting Communities During the 1990s[4]

	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990
Springfield, Oregon:	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Jonesboro, Arkansas:	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Edinboro, Pennsylvania:	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Pearl, Mississippi:	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
West Paducah, Kentucky:	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0

1 Ann O'Hanlon and Susan Levine, "Local Schools Shaken by Killings." *The Washington Post*, March 26, 1998. "Ending School Violence," National Public Radio's Morning Edition, June 5, 1998.
2 Ibid.
3 Federal Bureau of Investigation (1996) *Crime in the United States: Uniform Crime Reports*. Washington D.C.: US Department of Justice.
4 Table was compiled by calling the state Uniform Crime Bureaus for each relevant town, community or county.

The best data on the very specific threat of school-associated violent death reveals that children face a one in a million chance of being killed at school. Other research shows that the number of school shooting deaths have declined slightly since 1992. To give the reader a sense of the idiosyncratic nature of these events, the number of children killed by gun violence in schools is about half the number of Americans killed annually by lightning strikes.[5]

Child Deaths in America in Context, 1997-98

40	The number of people (including some adults) that were shot and killed in school during the academic year, 1997-98.
11	The number of children shot and killed in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; and Springfield, Oregon.
11	The number of kids who died in two days from family violence (child abuse or neglect, at the hands of their parents or guardian).[6]
8	The number of children who die from gunfire every day.[7]
3,024	The number of children who die from gunfire every year.[8]
90%	The percentage of children under age 12 who are killed by adults.[9]
75%	The percent of youths between ages 12-17 who are killed by adults.[10]

This is not to say that our children face no threats to their safety in society or in schools. However, with all the media coverage these school shootings have received, we have not witnessed the kind of reporting or analysis needed to give worried parents or concerned policy makers the context by which to judge the safety of our institutions of learning.

Rather than providing context, the media's linking of these shootings as "a trend" has tended to exacerbate people's fears about the safety of their children and youth in schools.

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5 According to "1996 Annual Summaries," by the National Climatic Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina, 1997, 88 people were killed by lightning in 1997.

6 A conservative figure of the number of children killed by abuse and neglect is 2,000 per year. "A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States." A Report of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Washington, D.C., 1995.

7 The U.S. Mortality Detail File, National Center for Health Stastics, Division of Vital Statistics. Rockville, MD. 1995.

8 Ibid.

9 Snyder, Howard N., Sickmund, Melissa and Poe Yamagata, Eileen (1996). Juvenile offenders and victims: 1996 update on violence. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

10 Ibid.

The result is that misdirected public policy is being generated to safeguard the schools, even though the real threat may lie elsewhere. To remedy the purported "crisis" of classroom violence, politicians have proposed solutions ranging from posting additional police officers in our schools, to eliminating any minimum age at which children may be tried as adults, to expanding the death penalty to juveniles. The Governor of Virginia suggested ending school-based after-hours programs due to the violence, even though a wide spectrum of criminologists, educators and law enforcement officials say that these programs constitute vital crime reduction and community enhancing strategies.

Likewise, concern among school administrators has reached such a fever pitch that children are now being expelled or suspended from school for making fake threats to harm the musical band "The Spice Girls" and "Barney" the purple dinosaur.

Children are now being expelled or suspended from school for making fake threats to harm the musical band "The Spice Girls" and "Barney" the purple dinosaur.

The authors agree that there are many threats facing this nation's children and youth that could be alleviated through public policy reform. However, as the risk of school-associated violent death is overblown, we are witnessing a tragic misdirection of attention and resources. This report will seek to catalog the real risks children and youth face in our schools. With this proper perspective in hand, we then hope to refocus the debate over our children's safety and to alleviate the real sources of violence facing our communities and kids.

Research Methodology

In this report, we sought to answer two primary research questions:

1. Is there a trend towards increasing violent school deaths in America?
2. What is the overall incidence of crime, and particularly homicides, in America's schools versus outside of schools?

Between 1990 and 1995 ... homicides in America dropped by 13 percent according to the FBI, but coverage of homicides on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs increased by 240 %.

Utilizing data and research from the United States Department of Education, the United States Department of Justice, the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, the Centers for Disease Control, the National School Safety Center, the National Safe Kids Campaign, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Justice Policy Institute sought to get a comprehensive picture of crime and shootings in school as compared to non-school violence, and violence in and out of school over time. As the reader can discern from the report, no one data source gives a complete picture of the school killing issue, but together they offer a more complete analysis than any one or two data sources could.

Unfortunately, no reliable, scientific counts are maintained regarding the true number of children killed in America's schools each year. The closest academic survey in existence is the data compiled annually by the National School Safety Center since the 1992-93 school year. The Center's data requires two cautionary notes – one definitional and one methodological – with respect to the goal of discerning the true number of children killed in schools and whether there is a trend over time.

In conducting their count, the Center uses a broad definition of "school related violent deaths" which are any deaths, whether they are suicides or homicides and whether they are deaths of adults or children, caused by adults or children in, near or on the way to school. As such, some deaths are included in the count simply because they occur on school property. An example of this kind of methodological bias is a case the Center counted occurring on May 29, 1998 at Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Nichole Weiser, a 26 year old speech diagnostician was shot and killed in the high school's staff parking lot by Michael Gramming,

her jealous boyfriend, who then turned the gun on himself.[11] A similar killing/suicide of two adults on school grounds occurred in Hoboken High School in New Jersey in February. As such, of the 40 "school-related violent deaths" which occurred in the 1997-98 school year, these adult deaths counted as 4, or 10 percent of the total.

Secondly, the Center relies on newspaper clippings as its school related violence death data source. Obviously, the place an issue occupies on the media's radar screen may affect whether a homicide appears in a newspaper or not. Between 1990 and 1995, for example, homicides in America dropped by 13 percent according to the FBI, but coverage of homicides on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs increased by 240 percent.[12] If evening news stories were used as a means of counting homicides in America during that time, a miscount of colossal proportions would have occurred. As such, particularly with regard to the 1997-98 data, what the Center may be counting is a change in reporting of school killings, rather than a change in school killings themselves. The research we collected from the Centers for Disease Control also used newspaper clippings as its counting mechanism, and has employed a broad definition for school deaths.

If evening news stories were used as a means of counting homicides in America during that time, a miscount of colossal proportions would have occurred

In both the Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989 and 1995 (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice) and Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools, 1996-97 (U.S. Department of Education) much broader assault and violent crime definitions are used than are generally utilized by the FBI and national law enforcement agencies. The reader should be cautious lest these data create the misperception that violent crime is higher in schools than in the community where the FBI data is the standard.

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11 National School Safety Center. Total School-Associated Violent Death Count: July 1992 to Present. Updated June 29, 1998. www.nssc1.org.

12 Center for Media and Public Affairs. "Network News in the Nineties: The Top Topics and Trends of the Decade." *Media Monitor, Volume* XI. July/August 1997.

We raise these limitations not as a critique of the integrity or intentions of the aforementioned research efforts, which should be credited for attempting to creatively make sense of an important phenomenon. Insofar as the data offered herein present a lower rate of homicides and violence in school than is expected, it should be remembered that even these data may present an inflated portrayal of "school associated violent deaths."

There is less than one in a million chance of suffering a school-associated violent death defined as both homicides and suicides.

Significant Findings

Based upon a review of the available data it is apparent that the recent school shootings were extremely idiosyncratic events and not part of any discernible trend. Ironically, they may have received magnified coverage because of the rarity of these tragic events rather than their typicality. Several recent studies have noted the extremely uncommon occurrence of school related suicides and homicides.

I. Centers for Disease Control's Study of "School-Associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1992-1994"

Published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1996, this 2 year joint study led by the Centers for Disease Control, *School-Associated Violent Deaths in the United States*, 1992-94, found that the estimated incidence of school-associated violent death was 0.09 per 100,000 student- years.[13] In other words, the researchers found that there is less than one in a million chance of suffering a school associated violent death defined as both homicides and suicides. In contrast, according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, there are 3.8 murdered juveniles per 100,000 juveniles within the US population – about 40 times the in-school death rate.[14]

13 Ibid. 1729.

14 Sickmund, Melissa. Snyder, Howard N., and Poe-Yamagata, Eileen. (1997). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1997 Update on Violence*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 1. NB: The 3.8 figure only includes homicides of juveniles, compared to the .09 figure which includes homicides and suicides.

Furthermore, over the 2 year period, 1992-94, 105 school-associated violent deaths were identified; 76 of which were student deaths. The researchers estimated that 0.62 percent of homicides and suicides among school-aged children were school-associated violent deaths.[15] As such, more than 99 percent of violent deaths of children occurred outside of school grounds during that period.

Table 2
Count of School Shooting Deaths

1992-93	55 deaths
1993-94	51 deaths
1994-95	20 deaths
1995-96	35 deaths
1996-97	25 deaths
1997-98	40 deaths[16]

II. National School Safety Center's Count of "School Shootings"

According to the data collected through news accounts by the National School Safety Center at Pepperdine University, the number of school associated violent deaths has declined slightly since they began to collect data in 1992. Their data suggest a 27.3 percent decline in school-associated violent deaths - including homicides and suicides - from the 1992-93 school year through the current school year. Overall, the 40 deaths this school year make it about normal for the 6 year study period.

Again, it warrants noting that even this relatively small figure of 40 school associated violent deaths is larger than the number of children killed in America's schools because it also includes suicides and killings of adults in schools, even when those killings occurred at the hands of other adults.

III. National Center for Education Statistics' Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools, 1996-97

A recent study published by the National Center for Education Statistics also evidences the relatively safe and stable environment that American public schools provide. During the spring and summer of 1997, a representative sample of principals of 1,234 public

15 Hachur, 1731.

16 National School Safety Center. *Total School-Associated Violent Death Count: July 1992 to Present.* Updated June 18, 1998. www.nssc1.org. Percentage calculated by the Justice Policy Institute. It is expected that this is a close estimate to the ultimate number of 1997-98 school year deaths because school is recessed for the summer and the 1997-98 counting period ends in August, 1998.

elementary, middle and high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia was surveyed to measure the state of school violence and discipline problems. One of the target areas of the survey included the incidence of crime and violence that occurred in public schools throughout the 1996-97 academic year. Ninety percent of the principals surveyed reported no incidence of serious, violent crime defined as murder, suicide, rape or sexual battery, robbery, or physical attack with a weapon. Furthermore, none of the principals interviewed reported any murders or suicides. The authors did note that the sample was too small to reliably estimate that no suicides or murders were committed in schools nationwide because they are "*relatively rare events.*"[17] (emphasis added).

In this same study, 80 percent of schools reported 5 or fewer crimes of any kind (serious or petty) in their schools during the 1996-97 school year.[18] Approximately 1,000 crimes were reported per 100,000 students in our nation's public schools; 950 of the crimes per 100,000 students were not serious or violent acts and only 50 crimes per 100,000 students were serious or violent crimes, as defined by the researchers.[19]

Eighty percent of schools reported 5 or fewer crimes of any kind (serious or petty) in their schools during the 1996-97 school year.

The amount of crime differed according to the instructional level of the school. Secondary schools were found to have a higher incidence of crime than elementary schools. 21 percent of high schools reported one or more serious crimes as compared to 19 percent of middle schools and only 4 percent of elementary schools.[20]

The location of schools was also noted by the authors as a significant variable in determining the incidence of crime within schools. City or urban schools were much more likely than other schools to report serious violent crime with 17 percent of city principals reporting at

17 U.S. Department of Education, 4
18 Ibid., 10.
19 Ibid., 9.
20 Ibid., v.

least one serious crime as compared to 11 percent of urban fringe schools, 8 percent of rural schools, and 5 percent of suburban/town schools reporting at least one serious crime.[21] These statistics flatly contradict the idea that the recent series of publicized shootings are an indication that rural schools are suddenly under siege from a new crime wave, as some articles suggested after the incidents in Springfield, Jonesboro, Pearl and Paducah.[22]

Eighty-nine percent of urban students responded that they felt either very safe or somewhat safe at school while 90% of suburban and rural students responded that they felt very safe or somewhat safe in school.

IV. Student Opinion: Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989-1995, Metropolitan Life Survey

According to a joint study by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, students perceive their schools as having low rates of crime. Their survey of students ages 12-19, entitled *Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989-1995*, **found only a 0.1 percent change in victimization from 14.5 percent in 1989 to 14.6 percent in 1995.**[23] What is particularly significant about this finding is that it covers the years 1992 and 1993, a time when overall juvenile arrests for homicide, rape and serious crimes peaked. Apparently, this crime wave did not wash over America's schools. Over that same time period, violent victimization among students increased from 3.4 percent to 4.2 percent.[24] The study did conclude that between 1989 and 1995, "more students were exposed to certain problems at school," because they were more likely to report violent victimization and exposure to drugs, gangs and guns.[25]

In the Metropolitan Life Survey of *The American Teacher 1993: Violence in America's Public Schools*, the nationally representative sample of students responded overwhelmingly that they believed their schools were safe. Eighty-nine percent of urban students

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21 Ibid., 8.
22 Fields, Gary, and Paul Overberg. "Juvenile homicide arrests rate on rise in rural USA." *USA Today*, March 26, 1998, 11A.
23 Chandler, I.
24 Ibid., 1.
25 Ibid., 12.

responded that they felt either very safe or somewhat safe at school while 90 percent of suburban and rural students responded that they felt very safe or somewhat safe in school. Again, this survey was conducted at a time which, we now know, was the national peak of violent juvenile arrests this decade.[26]

Fifty percent of childhood unintentional shooting deaths occur in the home of the victim, and approximately 40% occur in the home of a friend or relative.

These findings closely match readily accessible, but often overlooked, data published in *The Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics.* In the 1996 edition of this encyclopedia of crime statistics, it shows that the proportion of students who reported being threatened or injured by a weapon at school was actually lower in 1996 than it was in 1976.[27]

V. Hours and Location of Victimization

Finally, another indication that schools remain a relatively safe haven for our children is the fact that ***90 percent of all childhood deaths occur in and around the home and not in school.*** According to data compiled by the National Safe Kids Campaign, unintentional shootings among children are most likely to occur at times when children are unsupervised.[28] **Peak hours for these shootings are not during school hours but rather after school between 4 and 5 p.m.; during the late afternoon; on weekends; over the summer months of June, July and August; or during the holiday seasons of November and December.**[29] Fifty percent of unintentional childhood shooting deaths occur in the home of the victim and approximately 40 percent occur in the home of a friend or relative.[30]

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26 Metropolitan Life: Survey of the American Teacher, 1993: *Violence in America's Public Schools.* Project Directors Robert Leitman and Katherine Binnus. New York, New York: Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., 1993: 11.

27 Maguire, K., Pastore, AL., "Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1996," Bureau of Justice Statistics. The Department of Justice, Washington: D.C., 1997.

28 Webster., DW et al. Parents belief about preventing gun injuries to children. Pediatrics, 1992: 89; 908.14, 1995.

29 Ibid.: Choi E., er al. Deaths Due to Firearms Injuries in Children. Journal of Forensic Sciences, 1994.: Center to Prevent Handgun Violence. "Child's play: a study of 266 unintentional handgun shootings of children." CPHV, Washington D.C.: 1988 July 2.

30 Ibid.

Another way of looking at the context of the threat children face during the day is to measure admissions to hospital emergency rooms for "violence related" injuries. In a 1997 U.S. Department of Justice survey of over a million "violence related" admissions to hospital emergency rooms only 6 percent of the recorded "places of occurrence" were said to be a school. By contrast, 48 percent of the injuries occurred at home, 29 percent at work and 15 percent on the streets.[31]

Policy Responses

A number of recent public policy initiatives have been linked to the perception of rising school killings. These policy initiatives indicate that our concern with school shootings to the neglect of other child killings may be focusing attention in the wrong place. These policy responses emanate from every level of government; from the school house to the state house to the White House.

1. Ending Afterschool Programs

In response to the non-fatal shooting in Richmond, Virginia, Gov. James Gilmore (R) actually proposed *reducing* the number of nighttime athletic events to prevent an increase in violence. "The shocking pattern of violence that is terrorizing our nation's schools must end," he said. "Students cannot learn and teachers cannot educate in an unsafe environment."[32] In spite of the fact that far more crime is committed outside of school and that schools remain safe havens for students in crime ridden neighborhoods, Gilmore suggested that the violence warranted ending afterschool programs.[33]

In spite of the fact that far more crime is committed outside of school, and that schools remain safe havens for students in crime ridden neighborhoods, (Virginia Governor) Gilmore suggested that the violence warranted ending afterschool programs.

31 Rand, Michael R. "Violence-Related Injuries Treated in Hospital Emergency Departments." Bureau of Justice Stastics, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C.: 1997.
32 Baker, Donald P., and Spencer S. Hsu. "Two Are Shot at School in Richmond." The Washington Post. June 16, 1998, A1, A16.
33 —. "After Gunfire. Richmond Faces Fears." The Washingon Post. June 17, 1998. B3.

A wide spectrum of criminologists, teachers and community advocates agree that afterschool programs and events are necessary to create a safe environment because most juvenile offenses occur after school hours. In fact, data from the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) show that 1 in 5 violent crimes committed by juveniles occur in the 4 hours following the end of the school day (i.e., between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.).[34] These programs offer a voluntary safety net that can catch many children at risk and also provide enriching experiences and programs that are key to healthy childhood development.

2. Police Officers in Schools

President Clinton's reaction to the recent school shootings has been to request that Attorney General Janet Reno and Education Secretary Richard W. Riley find ways for the federal government to provide more police officers in schools. The President also endorsed Representative James H. Maloney's (D-CT) bill to increase the number of law enforcement officers available to deal with crime prevention and school delinquency problems.[35] "I urge Congress to pass his bill as a back-to-school special for America's children," he said.[36] Yet data compiled in this report have shown that more than 99 percent of juvenile homicides are committed outside of schools. The vast majority of youth homicide victims are killed by adults. With a small and stable-to-declining rate of school killings, it is difficult to understand how federal legislation adding more law enforcement officers to schools is a priority except as a response to generally shared misconceptions about homicides in schools.

More than 99% of juvenile homicides are committed outside of schools.

3. School Expulsions and Suspensions

The climate of fear generated by the coverage of these school shootings has been used to justify actions against students by school officials that previously would have been unthinkable. The concern

34 Sickmund, 26.
35 "Clinton Wants More Police Assigned to School Beats." The Washington Post. June 17, 1998. A12.
36 Ibid.

surrounding these school shootings are leading directly to the expulsion and suspension of students for minor, sometimes even non criminal acts.

- Two elementary school students in Tyrone, Georgia were suspended for composing a list of people they wanted to harm. Targeted victims on the list included the Spice Girls and Barney, the purple dinosaur.[37]

- In Parsippany, New Jersey, a 7th grader was discovered to have a list entitled "People I Would Want Gone," of 20 classmates and teachers. The 13 year old was placed under house arrest and must undergo psychiatric treatment as a result.[38]

- In Mesa, Arizona, 8th grader Raymond Granillo was suspended from school for 9 days for writing a story about an escaped convict who kills a teacher, 2 students and a janitor. The mother of the writer said, "They're overreacting. They're paranoid because of everything that's going around. That's the bottom line."[39]

- A 15 year old from Ocean County, New Jersey was arrested for a drawing he made of a man in the cross hairs of a rifle sight. The Pinelands Regional High School freshman was charged with making terroristic threats and was also suspended from school for at least 10 days.[40]

- In North Smithfield, Rhode Island, three 5th graders were suspended for the rest of the school year because they were overheard talking about how to plant a bomb in the building. No explosives or bombing plans were found.[41]

One survey of a computer database of newspaper stories found that between May 1 and July 1, 1998 there were a total of 216 stories of separate incidents of student suspension and expulsions, ranging from children writing notes that say, "kill, kill, kill," to a child being suspended for opening up a school computer with a pen-knife.[42]

One survey of a computer database of newspaper stories found that between May 1 and July 1, 1998 there were a total of 216 stories of separate incidents of student suspensions and expulsions.

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37 Brett, Jennifer. "Responding to trouble at Metro Schools." The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. May 30, 1998. D 07.
38 McHugh, Margaret. "Ominous wish list sparks fear in school." The Star-Ledger, June 2, 1998, p. 19.
39 The Associated Press. "School Suspends Student who penned murder tale." The Dallas Morning News, June 1, 1998. 14A.
40 The Associated Press. "Teen Suspended After Arrest for Gun Drawing." The Bergen Record. May 30, 1998. A05
41 "North Smithfield Suspends 5th Grader Over Bomb Threat." The providence Journal-Bulletin. May 30, 1998. A3.
42 This search was completed on Westlaw, a legal and legislative database that includes a sampling of newspapers from across the country. The search terms used were "suspend, expel, school and threat." Given that this does not include all the newspapers in the country, and the fact that not all of these cases could (or should) be covered by the press, this count understates the number of children who may have been suspended or expelled during this period.

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Setting aside concerns for freedom of speech, most educators and criminologists would warn against using expulsions and suspensions as a crime control mechanism, unless there is an authentic threat. If anything, kicking kids out of school for pranks will place them in harm's way and may contribute to more intense forms of delinquency as they miss out on education and become social pariahs.

4. Trying Kids as Adults

Just hours after the Jonesboro, Arkansas shooting, Senator Orrin G. Hatch said, "If we don't pass a juvenile crime bill, the country's going to see more and more of these things [school shootings]."[43] Hatch (R-UT), co-author of the Senate's Juvenile Crime Bill (S-10) with Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL), has proposed altering current law to jail youthful offenders, including those charged with acts such as running away from home, with adult offenders. The Senate is poised to do this, even though there is a higher recidivism rate among juveniles who are jailed with adults, and juveniles in adult institutions are 5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than those kept in juvenile institutions.[44] Ironically, in the same legislation, both Senators beat back a spate of gun control measures aimed at reducing accidental and purposeful shootings by youth.

(Senator) Hatch... has proposed altering current law to jail youthful offenders, including those charged with acts such as running away from home, with adult offenders.

The Senate juvenile crime bill is just one example of major criminal justice reform being proposed to remedy the "crisis" of school shootings that will fundamentally change the nature of children's rights. Others include:

- A bill in Texas which proposes that 11 year olds who commit serious crimes be eligible for the death penalty. "Current juvenile laws could not have anticipated violent crimes being committed by children this young,"[45] said sponsor State Senator James Pitts.

43 Weisman, Jonathan. "Shooting revives drive to toughen juvenile justice." The Baltimore Sun. March 25, 1998. 12A.
44 Ziedenberg, Jason and Schiraldi, Vincent. The Risks Juveniles Face When They Are Incarcerated With Adults. July 1997.
45 Templeton, Robin. "First, we kill all the 11-year olds." Pacific News Service. May 27, 1998.

- A bill before the Arkansas legislature that would allow a juvenile court judge to decide whether children of any age should be tried as adults. Introduced after the Jonesboro shooting, State Senator Ted Thomas' bill could see pre-teenage children serving 40 year sentences. "I've gotten more comments from people who...say, 'Just fry the little b****,' he says."[46]

While most children killed by a gun are killed by an adult, kids are killed in gun accidents at 23 times the rate they are killed in schools

While the idea of executing the 11-year-old suspect in the Jonesboro school shooting may fit someone's sense of vengeance, it will have dubious, if any, crime control impact. In reality, homicides committed by children under age 13 occur less frequently today than in 1965.[47] According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, there were 25 homicides committed by juveniles under age 13 in 1965[48] compared to 16 homicides committed by juveniles under age 13 in 1996 – a 36 percent decline.[49] Again, the real threats facing our children won't be dealt with by putting them in jail, or putting them to death.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A much more pressing issue for those concerned about the safety of children in America is the threat of everyday gun violence. As many as 8 kids a day are killed by guns. While most children killed by a gun are killed by an adult, kids are killed in gun accidents at 23 times the rate they are killed in schools. According to the Centers for Disease Control, children in America are 12 times more likely to die from guns than children in 25 other industrialized countries, including Israel and Northern Ireland.[50] While killings by juveniles with guns quadrupled from 1984 to 1994, non-gun killings by youths stayed the same.[51] Put another way, the entire increase in juvenile homicides between 1984 and 1994 was gun-related.

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46 Satter, Linda. "The Kids and the Courts." The Arkansas Democrat, Tuesday, June 30, 1998.
47 FBI. *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. 1965. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office. 1966..
48 Ibid.
49 –. *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. 1996. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office. 1997. 16.
50 *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control, February 7, 1997. p. 101
51 Snyder, Howard N., Sickmund, Melissa, and Poe-Yamagata, Eileen. (1996). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1996 Update on Violence*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs. 24.

While America has a homicide rate among its adults and juveniles which is still far too high, the good news from this report is that our nation's school children are well protected from homicides during school hours. Despite the recent shocking school shootings throughout the country, America's public schools remain very safe. The likelihood of becoming a victim of a school-associated violent death is slightly less than one in a million. The chance of a child being violently killed by an adult in their own home or somewhere other than school is far, far more likely. Statistically, as both students and principals have reported, crime does not dominate our schools. Rather than search for policies to make already safe schools safer (maybe, to the point of being overly restrictive on individual freedom and further alienating our youth), we should seek to channel the public energy created by these shootings to take guns out of the hands of children and adults and to provide constructive opportunities for children during peak crime hours.

Rather than search for policies to make already safe schools safer...we should seek to channel the public energy created by these shootings to take guns out of the hands of children.

Recommendation 1: Expand After-hours programs in schools

Ironically, one of the most cost-efficient and effective crime prevention strategies policy makers could adopt would be to have kids in America's schools. Contrary to Governor Gilmore's proposal to eliminate afterschool programs and athletic events in order to reduce crime, one way to reduce criminal activity among our youth is to provide enriched afterschool activities. Again and again studies have found that afterschool recreational programs which aggressively recruit youth and sustain participation in their programs hold excellent potential to prevent juvenile delinquency within the community.[52]

52 Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders. ed. James C. Howell, Washington D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. June 1995. 95.

Another example of effective afterschool programs which provide an opportunity for youth to resist being drawn to delinquent behavior are the "Beacon," or full-service, schools operating successfully in New York. As children are increasingly raised in families with both parents working or by single working parents, crime data reveal that the hours between the end of school supervision (3:00 pm) and the beginning of parental supervision (8:00 pm) are peak juvenile crime hours. For many of these children, the alternative to closing schools immediately after the school day ends is leaving children alone on the streets.

We can do little to stop the 3 dozen child shooting deaths that occur in schools until we take steps to deal with the 3,000 children who die from gunfire every year.

Full-service schools address this dilemma by productively occupying children during those peak crime hours in either educational, recreational or counseling activities. By leaving currently existing school open late – which in some communities are the most resource-rich settings in the neighborhood – full-service schools are able to provide a relatively low cost response to juvenile crime that does not restrict children's freedom, provides them with recreational and educational opportunities, and enhances our communities in the process.[53]

Recommendation 2: Restricting Mass Gun Sales

We can do little to stop the 3 dozen child shooting deaths that occur in schools until we take steps to deal with the 3,000 children who die from gunfire every year. The issue of taking guns out of the hands of our children (and some adults) is yet another area that has been inadequately addressed nationally, despite both the staggering data on killing of kids and the idiosyncratic school killings. While school shootings in rural communities are misperceived as typical of incidents involving children and guns, most killings of and by juveniles occur in urban areas, too often with illegal weapons.

53 "Quality Child Care and After School Programs: Powerful Weapons Against Crime." Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. Washington, D.C., 1998.

A "one-gun-a-month" law which prohibits mass gun sales has proven to be a very effective means of reducing homicides by and of juveniles. Such laws take guns out of the hands of both kids and adults by preventing mass gun purchases and resale on the black market.

For example, since both Virginia and Maryland have instituted "one-gun-a-month" laws, homicides committed by juveniles in Washington, D.C. have dropped by 63 percent, a drop explainable by no other demographic or policy-related factor.[54]

Prior to the enactment of Virginia's one-gun-a-month law, Virginia was a leading supplier of guns seized in homicides in Massachusetts. Since Virginia enacted its law, it is no longer a leading supplier of guns seized in Massachusetts crimes, and the odds of tracing a gun seized in a crime in Massachusetts to a Virginia gun dealer have declined by 72 percent.[55] After Virginia's law went into effect, Boston enjoyed a two-and-a-half year period without a juvenile being shot to death.[56]

The data contained in this report show that the public and policy makers are done a great disservice if they are led to believe that school houses are a primary locus for juvenile homicides in America.

Recommendation 3: Context in the Media

America cannot set rational public policy in the important area of child killings without better information from the media. No one expects the press to ignore tragic killings of kids, whether they occur on school grounds or in other places. But the data contained in this report show that the public and policy makers are done a great disservice if they are led to believe that school houses are a primary locus for juvenile homicides in America.

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54 *Crime and Justice Trends in the District of Columbia.* Prepared by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. Washington, D.C.: Office of Grants Management and Development, District of Columbia Government, Fall 1997. Calculated by the Justice Policy Institute.

55 Weil, Douglas, S., Ph.D., and Knox, Rebecca, MPH, MSW. "Evaluating the Impact of Virginia's 'One-Gun-A-Month' Law." The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, 1995, p.1.

56 Harden, Blaine. "Boston's Approach to Juvenile Crime encircles Youths, Reduces Slayings." *The Washington Post.* October 23, 1997. A3.

As other school shootings occur and/or the juveniles involved in the previous shootings are brought to trial, the public discourse could tremendously benefit from the presentation of a broader perspective on juvenile killings. To provide greater context to such cases, the media should at least explain: that school killings are not on the increase; that such killings make up a small minority of all kiliings of and by juveniles; that the specific communities in which these killings occurred generally experience very few killings by juveniles; that children are 3 times more likely to be killed by adults than by other juveniles; and that there is no trend toward younger and younger juvenile killings. These data are readily available, and would tremendously benefit the public's understanding of youth crime.

The recently publicized school shootings could provide a long overdue call to action for America to productively occupy our children and keep them away from guns, but only if our elected officials look in the right place for solutions.

This research was funded by a generous grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The authors would like to thank Jeffrey Butts, Ph.D. of the Urban Institute; Lori Dorfman, DrPH, University of California, Berkeley, School of Public Health; Mike Males, Doctoral Student at University of California, Irvine, School of Social Ecology; and Randall Shelden, Ph.D., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, School of Criminology, for their review and comments on this analysis.

The authors would also like to thank Christine Gralow, Jill Herschman, Amy Rossi, Eli Segal, Wendy Shang and Cheryl Upshaw for their assistance in preparing this report.

The Justice Policy Institute is a project of the non-profit Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. For more information on "school house hype," including research links, articles about the shootings and links to crime prevention programs that work, please visit our website at www.cjcj.org/jpi or call us in Washington, D.C. at (202) 678-9282 or in San Francisco, C.A. at (415) 621-5661.

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